



## **Vivian V. Simpson** **(1903-1984)**

***First woman lawyer in Montgomery County. First woman elected President of the Montgomery County Bar Association. First woman Secretary of State of Maryland***

Vivian V. Simpson was born in 1903 in Washington, D.C., and grew up in Takoma Park, Maryland. After graduating from McKinley Technical High School, she enrolled at the University of Maryland to study teaching, but she never became a teacher. Since her youth, she was known for her "rebellious" disposition. That "rebelliousness" and the desire to fight for equal rights prompted her to take action in the university in 1923.

As a student, Simpson observed that there were certain rules in the University of Maryland College Park that applied to female students but not to their male counterparts. While male students could smoke on the university premises and keep the lights in their dormitories on all night if desired, female students were forbidden to smoke on campus and were required to turn off their lights in their rooms by 9:30 p.m. Simpson complained about these rules and consequently was labeled a "troublemaker." At the same time, a group of coeds provided affidavits to a reporter from The Washington Post alleging misconduct among university officials. The report revealed improper activities between coeds and professors, including drinking, swimming parties, car rides, and even "spanking parties." The controversy following the front page Washington Post article eventually drove the President of the University of Maryland, Albert F. Woods, to resign. After the scandal erupted, students voted to pass a resolution of confidence for the university administration, denying the reports. Simpson and another female student vetoed other students' vote of confidence. When questioned by the dean, Simpson refused to provide any information or even to answer any questions. The university threatened not to allow Simpson to re-register the following year if she did not cooperate with the administration. Simpson maintained her position, and the following year the university blocked her registration, inviting her to transfer somewhere else. With the help of her father, a Washington grocer, she sued the University of Maryland for reinstatement. She won the decision, but the Court of Appeals reversed it in the case of Woods v. Simpson in 1924.

Simpson transferred to George Washington University, where she remained the next few years, earning straight A's and obtaining her B.A. in 1925. Despite her loss, Simpson believed that the whole experience was beneficial to her. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me," she declared to a local newspaper in 1978. "It prepared me to practice law. It toughened me. Before that, I was as innocent as a babe in arms." In 1927, she graduated with honors from the George Washington University Law School.

In law school, she was one of only seven women in a class of 74 students. "When I first enrolled in law school, a few of the neighbors thought it was a little peculiar," Simpson confided to the same newspaper,

"but they got over it." She began her practice in Montgomery County the same year that she graduated. When she opened a law office in Rockville as a solo practice, and later in partnership with her brother Joseph B. Simpson, Simpson became the first woman to practice law in Montgomery County.

During her long professional career, she continued achieving a number of "firsts." In 1938, she became the first woman attorney on the Board of County Commissioners, predecessor of the County Council. In 1940, she was appointed by Governor Herbert R. O'Connor to the State Industrial Accident Commission, now called the Workers' Compensation Commission. She was the first woman ever appointed to that position. In 1949, she became the first woman elected President of the Montgomery County Bar Association. That same year, she was appointed the first woman Secretary of State of Maryland, under Governor William Preston Lane, Jr. (1949-51). After a term as Secretary of State, she resigned in 1951 stating she was not made for politics. "I don't like to be at other people's beck and call," she declared to a local newspaper, "I'm too independent for that."

In 1950, Simpson received the Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award from George Washington University for notable achievement in public service. She also was vice president of the Maryland State Bar Association from 1958 to 1959, a member of the Judicial Appointments Committee from 1975 to 1977, and a member of the American Bar Association and of the American Judicature Society.

In 1979, she received the Professional Achievement Award from George Washington University Law Association for her pioneering efforts in the practice of law and for her years of service to the public. She was presented with a permanent golden membership card. In 1999, Simpson was posthumously honored as one of the twenty "Lawyers of the Century" in Montgomery County by the Maryland Bar Association. Simpson was respected and admired by judges, lawyers, and court personnel for her intellectual capacity, strong personality, integrity, compassion and tolerance. Judges often would call her for advice (a practice no longer permitted under the Code of Judicial Ethics). She claimed that she never experienced discrimination by other attorneys or judges, and she disliked profoundly to be referred to as a "woman lawyer." When referring to her practice, she would said that were "there are no women lawyers," just lawyers.

Simpson dedicated her life to the career she loved: the practice of law. Since her youth, she decided that she did not want to be limited by educational barriers. Reportedly, Simpson deliberately did not learn how to type when she was a student, so that she would not be hired as a stenographer. Besides the law, she loved to read books and poetry, and to be at her farm in Poolesville, Maryland. She was an enthusiastic baseball fan. Vivian Simpson retired in 1980, and died in August of 1987 at the age of 84 after a long illness.

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## **SOURCES:**

- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- [www.md.archives.state.md.us](http://www.md.archives.state.md.us)
- [www.montbar.org/archives/history.htm](http://www.montbar.org/archives/history.htm)